

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi

Section 9: Relevance to Mencius, practical advice: small villages & pacifism

- Overlaps between Laozi and Mencius (writings at the same time?) - naturalness, wary of language
- Laozi's theory can generate a Daoist criticism of Mencian Confucianism
- Laozi's observation towards Mencius - institutions that you think are 性 *xìng*^{human nature} turn out to be *deeply* socially cultivated
 - They seem natural because we imbibe them in the process of learning a social language
 - We should be wary of social values such as status, wealth, and style
 - We learn to want to be cultivated and thus condition ourselves to favor expensive tastes.
These are costly values and goals, whereas simpler, natural values are easier and real, e.g. fresh air, beautiful views, clean environment.
 - We learn by second nature to discriminate in unnatural ways and acquire hard-to-satisfy values
- Our culture/economy uses natural desires to create even *stronger* desires to manipulate us
- These are examples of a consumerist society shaping our desires/behaviour
- Laozi points out how this creates inflated market prices, well above real value
 - Social desires create competition
- In everyone following a single 道 *dào*^{path} that unites us all, we end up in competition with each other for socially valued things (not those of *real natural* value)
 - Laozi's pacifism – the appropriate song celebrating war is the funeral dirge
 - Source of war is urge for a single 道 *dào*^{path} that unites all of 天下 *tiān-xià*^{social world} – an empire
- Laozi's utopia - live in small villages, never travel
- Our innate, natural desires are very *thin* and easily satisfied

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- However, Laozi's utopia is still not fully coherent
 - Even in small villages we use language
 - Maybe we might want to marry somebody from the next village
 - Knotting cords is still a form of language